

## Installation: the vital ingredient for a good exhibition

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Installing exhibitions and displays requires forward planning and experience to make it a safe and stress-free part of every museums schedule. INSITE asked two providers of professional exhibition services about the procedures and practices they use to ensure that everything goes to plan.

Paul Nuttney from Exhibitone and Shaun Kirby from Thylacine have been working with museums and galleries over many years and outline some key practices that every collections custodian can learn from.



There are many things to consider before the actual installation of an exhibition or display starts to happen. Prior planning for the placement of works, making mounts, fitting or checking hanging systems and display solutions all require discussion with in-house staff or providers of professional services and the allocation of funding for materials and equipment. Deciding what the chain of command for an installation will be is vital so that everyone knows who is responsible for various stages of the install. For an installation to progress uneventfully common sense needs to prevail, but the benefit of experience ensures that safe and effective work practices are second nature. So, what can go wrong and how can expensive mistakes or injury be avoided?

Preparing the environment for an installation is essential and includes paying attention to your personal attire, an awareness of one's self in the gallery setting and keeping a tidy work environment. No one wants a pencil or drill bit dropping out of a pocket onto a painting. Being aware of the pathways in an installation environment is important so that screwdrivers or other equipment don't get kicked across floors into objects or people. Storage areas also require care as the spaces are often crowded so even bending to locate an item has to be

done carefully so as not to knock nearby items on shelves or paintings on racks. Storage racks require experienced handling so that pictures being lifted upwards don't knock the painting above off a rack. Even in established museums on-the-ground staff, who are very familiar with their equipment, may have become wedded to habits that are potentially hazardous for artworks and objects. For example, using fencing wires for hanging artworks is fairly commonplace but requires the pulling of the works to stretch the wires to level them, which can put the work at risk. The most secure way to fix artworks is to directly attach them to the walls after assessing the wall type and locating the timber support.

In the construction industry there are regulations about the use of ladders and they are no longer regarded as safe working platforms, so the use of various lifts is now standard. It is no longer necessary for staff to manually lift heavy works because there are a lot of aids available, such as hydraulic trolleys, to prevent injury.<sup>1</sup> Paul offers that, "the cost of a personal injury claim to a museum or gallery is a lot more than the \$600 (approx.) for a trolley that can carry up to 100kgs. Most galleries, museums and councils will put the relevant staff through some OH&S training and have

guidelines about the expected processes for installation work."

In the area of object handling the correct selection of gloves is important, such as the inert Nitrile rubber gloves that won't leave a residue on an artwork or frame. During the unpacking of crates for touring exhibitions Paul recommends that you pay attention to how you lift, so that one corner of the crate remains on the ground while a dolly is placed under the centre of the crate, preventing the full weight being taken manually. He says that communication with the people you are working with is important so that movements and tasks can be coordinated. Shaun Kirby suggests further install basics such as: "when moving objects from a work space to a display case, plan the route so nothing is in the way or that no one is walking through the area. When we assess objects and draw mounts we never use pens so that there can be no permanent marks left behind."

Professional service providers will work with any size organisation to advise or carry out work in the planning stages. Installation ought to be a consideration during the grant application process so that a budget is created to allow for some specialised displays. For Thylacine most installation work comes through competitive tenders, even if there is an



existing relationship with an organisation. The tender process provides an opportunity for detailed budgeting and planning. "The lead-time for an exhibition can be many months so we work with designers and the exhibition team to discuss how the work will be installed. If they want an FB Holden hanging from the ceiling then we will discuss how that can be done and if it is feasible in the budget. We will fabricate display materials and schedule the install so that everyone is on hand and that objects are placed in an order, for example, so that we are not ever reaching over another object. We will bring people in with different skills depending on what is needed, such as mount cutters and experienced object handlers. We will also think about the protocols that some museums have and select staff that can cooperate with those regulations."

Another part of the installation process is finding solutions so that a display can be mounted according to the wishes of the exhibition team. Thylacine worked on the mounts for object displays at MONA and had a particular challenge finding a way to display a series of Mummies in an upright position in accord with the owner, David Walsh's, wishes. "The Mummies are very fragile and a two part object (a lid and a base) and would not be able to bear weight on their wood base, so we

had to engineer a mount that would satisfy conservators and also be invisible to the viewer while keeping the two parts from weighing on the base. When we do our work well the objects on display are jewel like and without a visible framework. The object is the most important thing and that is the challenge of making a good mount."

Planning is critical to keeping an installation job on budget and for preventing accidents. Familiarity with the necessary equipment is very important and providers have an advantage in that they are using the necessary tools all the time whereas staff being called on intermittently to hang work may not select the right tool for a job. Shaun agrees that "it won't save money if you have to get someone in to fix an error made by inexperienced volunteers, staff or artists. Accuracy in the preparation of mounts is vital and will really improve the appearance of a display."

With exhibitions that come from elsewhere there can be different protocols around the handling of objects to consider. Sometimes the couriers coming with international exhibitions may have a level of comfort with their objects that contrasts with what the venue's staff would allow as the temporary caretakers. A certain amount of diplomacy can be

Opposite: Installation of artwork by Greg Taylor and Friends at MONA by Thylacine.

Below: Creating the mount for one of the Mummies at MONA for an upright display. Photos courtesy of Thylacine.

required to manage the staging of a shared project.

Another important concern is the provision of security for artworks as part of an installation. At MONA the artwork by Greg Taylor and Friends of multiple porcelain vaginas required small, individual security fixtures that would not be visible but would leave the work on open display. Thylacine has worked with mechanical interactives that need a lot of design input because of the amount of use they get, "I have seen kids with a foot literally against a wall pulling on things trying to drag them off a fixture. Anticipating that sort of physical engagement is part of the job of making mounts and displays bomb proof and invisible."

Security considerations extend to education programs in exhibitions that may introduce an activity, such as drawing in an exhibition, that create mess that needs to be cleared away hourly or maintained. So staff have to be assigned to follow that up which may not be possible with a limited budget, but is necessary for OH&S so that no one slips on litter or associated material.

There are many considerations to be made for an installation to work well and result in an excellent exhibition. Most of these can be addressed with careful planning, an inclusive detailed budget, experienced and prepared staff or service providers and attention to safety.

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<sup>1</sup> For general information about regulations and work site safety, including the safe use of ladders, go to: [www.worksafe.vic.gov.au](http://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au)